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Connecting the Dots

Parks, Preservation, and Heritage in the 21st Century

For all of their history, national parks have been cited as contributing to the welfare of this democracy. To explore this idea further, I sought the park idea in the seminal documents, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. If the park idea is there, it is there in the broad statements of principle that begin them:

> *…certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.*
>
> Declaration of Independence

> *…to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity…*
>
> Preamble to the Constitution

If the park idea is to be found in these sentiments I would suggest that the relevant phrases are: "the pursuit of Happiness" and "promote the general Welfare and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity."

Others have made the connection. In his now-famous paper to the Commissioners of Yosemite Valley in 1864, Frederick Law Olmsted wrote, "It is the main duty of government…to provide means of protection for all its citizens in the pursuit of happiness…." He continued:

> It is a scientific fact that the occasional contemplation of natural scenes…is favorable to the health and vigor of men and especially to the health and vigor of their intellect…it not only gives pleasure…but increases the subsequent capacity for happiness and the means of securing happiness.

In 1912, during the controversy over Hetch Hetchy, J. Horace McFarland wrote, "The primary function of the national parks is to maintain in healthful efficiency the lives of the people…."

In his 1967 book, *Wilderness and the American Mind,* Roderick Nash describes the beliefs of Justice William O. Douglas, "Thus for Douglas…the American wilderness is the ultimate source of American liberal and democratic traditions. Without it…Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness recede further from the grasp of man."

If these references do not prove the relationship between parks and citizenship, they at least demonstrate a historical tendency to believe in the connection.

A further distillation of key phrases exposes those connections:

- pursuit of happiness
- general welfare
- blessings of liberty
- ourselves and our posterity
- increases the subsequent capacity for happiness and the means of securing happiness
- maintain…healthful efficiency
- the ultimate source of American liberal and democratic traditions

Citizenship, the 21st Century, and the National Park Service

If we re-examine this connection on the brink of the 21st century, perhaps it will give us some ideas about the role that parks and the National Park Service should play in supporting an informed citizenry. Some ideas seem the same: education, inspiration, health. Perhaps some are different, or at least different in emphasis: sustainability, resource depletion, changing demographics. And what about those who don't visit parks—is the system of any use in supporting them as citizens? Indeed is the system a system,

This historic and majestic view of Glacier National Park illustrates the role of national parks in fulfilling the aims of the nation's founders. Photo courtesy NPS.

or simply a collection of individual parks and the service a loose confederacy?

In the focus groups conducted as part of the messaging project (intended to improve National Park Service external and internal communications), we found that the public liked us a lot, but they saw us as the managers of special vacation destinations. There was little recognition of linkages through the national park system and less of our responsibility for conservation programs that exist outside of park boundaries. To be sure, when told of such programs, the groups liked us more.

I believe those results are accurate, and I believe we reinforce them with our behavior as an organization. Too often our stories are told park-by-park. It is Antietam or Gettysburg, not the Civil War. It is Rocky Mountain or Glacier, not the Rocky Mountains. It is the highest, the deepest, the oldest; superlatives, not comparatives.

During the government shutdown of 1994, we were inundated by requests to open parts of parks because of their value as tourist destinations. The potentially positive effect of this respite on park resources was never mentioned. The grizzly bears didn't call.

This experience caused Director Roger Kennedy to observe, "The support for the National Park Service is a mile wide and one-eighth of an inch deep." In its aftermath, he proposed the education initiative.

In working with the messaging project, I have given considerable thought to how I would like the organization to be seen in the 21st century. It is as stewards of a heritage, not as managers of national parks.

A people's heritage arises from its collective experience. It is inter-generational by definition. Indeed, Walter Lippman in his book, *The Public Philosophy,* says,

> The body which carries this mystery is the history of the community, and its central theme is the great deeds and the high purposes of the great predecessors. From them the new men descend and prove themselves by becoming participants in the unfinished story…No one generation can do this. For no one generation…[is] capable of creating for themselves the arts and sciences of a high civilization.

In these ideas we see a reflection of the Constitution: "…secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity," not as a lofty sentiment but as a duty of citizenship.

Heritage is an expansive and pervasive idea. It is different for each individual and yet there are shared elements, a collective heritage, if you will.

If we consider the role of the national park system and National Park Service in heritage, we fit in that second or "collective" area. These parks and programs are the recognition in law that there are places, in our collective experience, that merit preservation.

Heritage is not an idea that has a boundary and the body of national park legislation is not confined by the boundaries of a park. Consider historic preservation legislation as an example. Those who wrote the Historic Sites Act of 1935 were not content to preserve properties belonging to the National Park Service. They set out to save important places regardless of ownership.

That perspective will need to pervade our management in the 21st century. The portfolio of programs we manage outside of park boundaries has the potential for raising our influence in the society-at-large, and in building a system of physical connectors (long distance trails, wild and scenic rivers, and heritage areas) that raise the horizon of preservation in surrounding communities and in the country.

Let's see what the implications of heritage stewardship are to specific program areas.

Natural Resources

The biologist Edward O. Wilson has predicted that a day will come when, "the flora and fauna of a country will be thought part of the national heritage as important as its art, its language, and that astonishing blend of achievement and farce that has always defined our species." When these resources are cast in that light, we see them in the context of the generations. We have inherited them from our predecessors; we seek to pass them on to our progeny. If we embrace Wilson's idea, we must turn to the question of what it will take to be successful in accomplishing that task.

For most of the 20th century, we have practiced a curious combination of active management (deer are good, wolves are bad), and passive acceptance (if we let it alone it will be all right), while becoming a superb visitor services agency. In the 21st century that management style is clearly insufficient. Regional, and in some cases, global influences impact the resources of parks and protected areas. Our ignorance of natural resources and their interrelationship remains profound.

If we are to achieve our intergenerational task, we will need to expand existing inventory programs and develop effective techniques that monitor the vital signs of natural systems. We need to enlist others in the scientific community to help, but also to facilitate their inquiry. We need to integrate these efforts with an educational component so that child and adult, amateur and professional benefit from the knowledge uncovered in these places. This information should be available widely, not just to those who visit the sites.

The information contained in these places should be part of a larger continuum that assists the surrounding community (regional and global) in making choices. If we return to the heritage idea, these parks and protected places should become increasingly "useful" to surrounding communities, not as board feet of timber or tons of minerals, but as benchmarks of environmental information.

To unlock this information, we need to revitalize and expand our natural resources programs, strengthen partnerships with the scientific community, and share the knowledge produced with educational institutions and the public.

A successful program would answer these questions:

- What are we protecting in parks?
- What is their condition?
- What is the trend of the condition over time?
- What is the condition, trend, and impact of resources not confined to park boundaries?
- What are the implications of these findings to parks and to the larger systems in which they reside?
- How can these implications be best communicated to the broader society?
- What are the management systems that need to be put in place to best answer these questions?

The programs described here will move the National Park Service toward the answers. When put in place, they will tell a story useful to scholar and student, public and park manager, those who visit parks, and those who learn from them.

Some years ago, writer Barry Lopez spoke to a National Park Service audience. During the presentation, Lopez expanded on the role of the storyteller. From that he sketched a role for his audience of park rangers: "You are storytellers," he said. "You tell stories so that people will recognize patterns to help them lead decent and dignified lives."

Our efforts in natural resources must move us toward the realization that we have a stewardship duty to pass to those who follow the full complement of their natural heritage. Only by increasing the knowledge that is the basis for a powerful story will we fulfill that duty of stewardship.

Cultural Resources

In his book, *Arctic Dreams*, Barry Lopez endorses a "cultural conservatism." He contrasts this with "economic conservatism," an approach that endorses the least intrusive behavior toward the marketplace.

The cultural conservatism he describes is characterized by reverence and restraint. If we are to preserve the important elements of any cultural system we must practice this form of conservatism.

The national park system, viewed collectively, contains places we choose, as a nation, to revere. It is our expression of Lopez's "cultural conservatism."

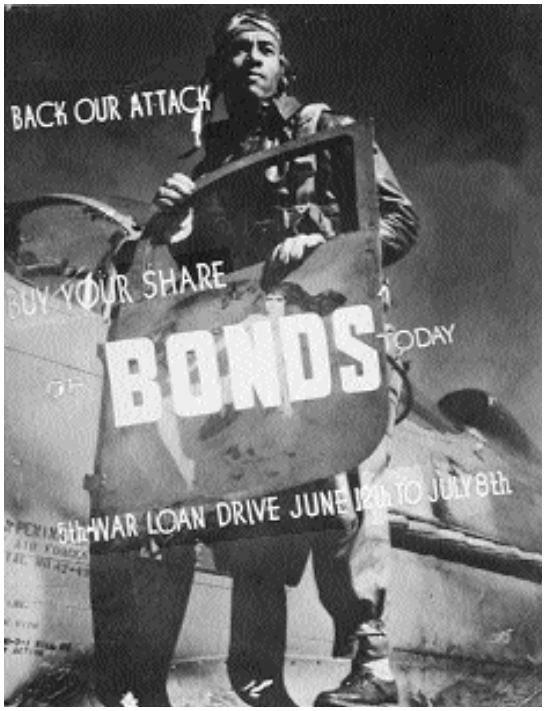
Earlier I quoted E.O. Wilson's prediction that someday we would recognize flora and fauna as part of our heritage. We made an earlier start on places that commemorate our history and prehistory. In the 19th century, Mount Vernon and historic sites in the city of Boston were revered and thought worthy of preservation. By the early 20th century the remnants of earlier Native American culture such as Casa Grande and Mesa Verde were afforded protection under the Antiquities Act of 1906.

By 1935, with the passage of the Historic Sites Act, a system was in place to extend the mantle of preservation to places outside the national park system through the National Register of Historic Places.

A parallel broad-based approach has yet to be fully developed for natural resources.

There are other contrasts. The inventory of cultural resources is finite. The treatment of them, though frequently specialized, often falls into familiar categories: carpentry, stonemasonry, architecture, engineering. Their condition inevitably declines with time and their preservation depends on human intervention.

Yet, as we look at cultural places and ask of their potential in the 21st century there is common ground with natural resources. There is



Now a unit of the national park system, the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site at Moton Field in Tuskegee, Alabama, commemorates the Tuskegee Airmen, the nation's first African-American military pilots. Photo courtesy the Museum Management Program, National Park Service.

much we don't know about natural resources. The national park system contains thousands of archeological sites never recorded. There are important structures without a historic structure report. Much research remains to be done. Further, there are aspects of our history unrepresented in the system; or, in existing areas, stories that have not been told.

Recently, Congress authorized Mazanar National Historic Site, a World War II Japanese internment camp in the Owens Valley of California. Moton Airfield in Alabama has been set aside to remember the Tuskegee Airmen, our first African-American military pilots. At the Custis-Lee Mansion in Arlington, Virginia, the fact that most of the people living there were slaves is now part of the interpretive program. The widespread character of the Underground Railroad caused Congress to authorize coalitions of local sites in communities throughout the eastern half of the nation.

The role of these sites in our everyday life needs to be expanded. We need to link them thematically so that they become an adjunct to our more formal education. The National Register of Historic Places has developed a program called Teaching with Historic Places. The lesson plans are designed to enrich the teaching of history, geography, social studies, literature, and other curricula. Plans are available on 74 subjects including the Knife River Indian Village; the Johnstown Flood; and Attu, the only North American site to see World War II combat. They are designed to enrich and excite and to express the value of past to the present.

Parks and the Future

These efforts are aimed at fulfilling Roger Kennedy's hope that parks would become more useful to all of the people. They also echo Lippman's view that as we stand on the shoulders of previous generations we owe a duty to those that will be the future.

The American theatrical figure Garland Wright has spoken eloquently of this relationship,

> I don't think it's possible, if the human race has a future, that we can disconnect from the past. I think that one of the functions…[of the theater]…is to keep our past in front, as an element of our modern lives…and also we have to admit that the past is the foundation of our present. That we are the future of the past.

In a world viewed that way, parks can become a window to our past, a foundation for our present, and a legacy for our future. They can be

- reservoirs of biological diversity
- scientific baselines
- linked ecosystem laboratories
- general-education laboratories
- archive and tool kit
- library
- island

From this vantage point, parks become more than places to visit. They become an important part of our heritage, they contain lessons useful in everyday lives, they are the origins of programs that preserve places important to people close to their homes, and they promote the duty of citizenship. They become

- the Civil War
- the Rocky Mountains
- the Civil Rights Movement
- Jazz
- a pristine river corridor in a city
- a greenway between parks
- an eighth grade class identifying amphibians

They become an essential part of Lippman's "unfinished story…the arts and sciences of a high civilization."

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